

Stress: Friend or Foe?

In today's fast-paced world, stress seems to have become a way of life. At times your shoulders may tense up and your back may hurt. You may feel irritable, angry, or unable to concentrate. These may all be signs of stress.

Stress is a physical reaction to demanding situations. A certain amount of daily stress is normal and necessary. Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life. Stress can help move us to action. We all thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, and challenges add a level of stress that keeps us active. Our goal should not be to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us. However, according to the American Institute of Stress, stress causes adverse health effects in 43 percent of adults, and 75–90 percent of visits to the doctor are related to stress. When left unchecked, stress can lead to serious health problems.

Everyone handles stress differently. Some people seek out situations that may seem stressful to others. A major life decision, such as changing careers or buying a house, might be overwhelming for some, while others may welcome the change. The key to achieving balance is to determine your tolerance levels for stressful situations and to learn how to manage the stress in your life.

Symptoms of stress

The effects of stress can be both physical and emotional. Below are signs to look for, if you think you may be experiencing too much stress.

- Difficulty sleeping
- Constant feeling of urgency
- Anxiety
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs including smoking
- Tension headaches, stomachaches, backaches or other physical discomforts
- Digestion problems
- Rise in blood pressure
- Isolation
- Changes in your eating behaviors (under-eating or overeating)
- Irritability

When does stress become a problem?

Below are some guidelines to help you identify a potential problem:

- When stress becomes a way of life
- When stress or its effects interfere with work or relationships
- When stress causes you to lose self-confidence or self-esteem

Tips for managing stress

- **Be Realistic.** If you feel overwhelmed by some activities, learn to say NO. Eliminate an activity that is not absolutely necessary. You may be taking on more responsibility than you can or should handle.



- **Meditate.** Ten to twenty minutes of quiet reflection every day may bring relief from chronic stress as well as increase your ability to handle stress. Use the time to relax the best way you know how.
- **Do one thing at a time.** For people under tension or stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable. Make a list to help you feel organized and check things off as they are accomplished. The best way to cope is to do one task at a time.
- **Exercise.** Regular exercise is a popular and effective way to relieve stress. Twenty to thirty minutes of daily exercise can help the mind and body.

When There's More Work to Go Around: Coping with Job Burnout and Stress

In today's difficult economic times, employees are often asked to do more with less. Turnover, rightsizing and even military deployment can reduce the number of staff available and put pressure on remaining employees. Changes like these often mean that the roles and responsibilities that make up individuals' jobs change, too. Tension or animosity can develop and stress levels can be high.

A review of job definitions and roles can help. As always, open, clear and complete communication is very important. Seeking out training and coaching as job roles evolve also can help to reduce stress levels.

The productive workplace

During times of change that result in reduced staffing, organizations—and individuals—can employ the following:

- **Focus on outcomes.** Focus on performance and productivity, not the quantity of time that is spent working.
- **Flexibility.** Being willing to accommodate change and having a management structure that does, too, helps build trust and respect between supervisors and their team members.
- **Improved communication.** Open communication about the challenges and potential conflicts is very important. Don't wait to be talked to—you can share your concerns now.

Balancing the new demands on your time can be overwhelming. Learning how to manage your time effectively can help. The key is to make the most of the time you have available. Try these tips:

- Identify short- and long-term goals. Review your goals frequently, and update them as they change.
- Establish priorities.
- Recognize that some tasks are more important than others. If you're not sure how your new responsibilities fit in, ask.
- Be realistic.

Remember that some projects take longer than others, especially when they involve new tasks. Be sure to set goals that you can achieve and, therefore, feel satisfied with your accomplishments, and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."

Remember . . .

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to you and your eligible dependents 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All services are confidential and provided at no cost to you. As part of your EAP, you now have access to MagellanAssist. Visit today at <http://www.dpa.ca.gov/benefits/other/eap/Assist.shtm>